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Autobiography as a Quest for Identity

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Abstract

What is the difference between biography and autobiography? The former is more revealing and hence is more in demand. According to Graham Greens autobiography is only ‘a sort of life’. It is more selective. He observed that ‘it begins later and ends prematurely. If one cannot close a book of memoirs on the death bed, any conclusion must be arbitrary’. The reader of an autobiography becomes an interested witness to the writer’s account of his life. He is a keen observer of an author’s obsession with his identity and the crises of his life. The reader can find lessons for his own life from the author’s account. Necessarily, he is more an active participant of the creative process while reading an autobiography than while reading a novel. The reader is bound to find parallels between the experiences of the writer and his own. The history of autobiographical writing dates back to the ‘confessions’ of St. Augustine written in the second half of the fourth century. The difference between Christian idea of confession and autobiography as it developed in the eighteenth, nineteenth and our century must be noted. Peter Abbes says that ‘confessions, in their traditional form, crave forgiveness,

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autobiography desires understanding. Confessions are devoted to salvation, autobiographies to individuation'. It is only with Rousseau that the form of memoirs took its present shape – 'simply myself'. The importance of the individual reader was understood by autobiographers after Rousseau. Gibbon, Goethe, Ruskin, Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill, Newman, Darwin and a host of others gave the field of autobiography its pride of place. In our century autobiography has been used as a means for relentless self-exploration and for organising our experience.

Key words- Autobiography, quest for identity, alienation,

Of the books that come to the book-stalls these days, autobiographies form a major part. Even as this essay is being written four American autobiographies have arrived at the book stalls of India – Isaac Asimov's, Robert James Waller's, Ingmar Bergman's (*The Magic Lantern*) and Art Buchwald's. *The Pelican Guide to English literature* has a chapter devoted to autobiographical writings. Yet the study of autobiography has been given importance only recently. The study of the autobiography is more established in America. Some American Universities have included it as a major field of study in Graduate courses. The British poet and critic, Peter Abbs comments "Alas, what has been firmly established in America has hardly begun to take root in our own culture." (513). The study of the autobiography is yet to be given importance in the academic world of England and the Commonwealth.

This does not imply that the number of autobiographies written is not large enough. Rather there is an embarrassment of riches. Books like writing your life story by Nancy Smith flood the market to help people write their memories. The list of writers who have published their memoirs in recent years speaks for itself. It includes such names as Philip Mason, John Osborne, Dom Moreas, R.K. Narayan, V.S. Pritchett, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Art Buchwald, A.J.

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Iyer, Nocolette Devas and A.J.P Taylor. The list does not include the classics of autobiographies of the early part of this century by writers like Powys, W.H. Davies and Edwin Muir.

Why do people write autobiographies? H.G. Wells says. ‘If you don’t want to explore an egoism you should not read autobiography’.(2) Art Buchwald in his recently published memoirs – *Leaving Home* observes that it is the most egotistical project a person can undertake, but it does provide an opportunity to sum up the few years I’ve spent on earth in my own words.”(1) Buchwald feels that the writer of an autobiography has complete control over the contents of his work, and the reader will be surprised to find that the author is the hero of all his stories, and that he presents a magnificent profile in courage. Besides egoism, autobiography is an attempt to vindicate one’s past, one’s whole career. Another major motive behind every autobiography is to idolize ourselves, to present ourselves in a better light. The desire for fame, the last infirmity of noble minds, can also lead to the writing of an autobiography.

The distinguished eighteenth century historian, Edward Gibbon, has succinctly explained in his autobiography the nature of autobiographical writing. He regards ‘Truth, naked unblushing truth’ to be ‘sole recommendation of this personal narrative’. (1) Though he regards the motive to be his own amusement, he takes into account the curiosity of the public about the life of a writer. Lastly he observes – ‘I must be conscious that no one is so well qualified as myself to describe the series of my thoughts and actions’. (1) Are these the only reasons which make writers pen their own life story and people to read them? Libraries stock them. Book sellers display them prominently. The modern age which Harold Bloom called

‘chaotic’ has resulted in man’s obsession with the question of identity. Are we ourselves? “Is this the way we should live?” are the questions that echo throughout modern literature. Simone de Beauvoir points out that finding the truth about ourselves is the most rewarding task that a writer can undertake. She read widely people’s accounts about themselves to resolve her own crisis with her ‘sense of self’.(7) The principle purpose of autobiographical writing is to search for one’s identity. An autobiography is like visiting a place where one has been. Here he is a total stranger now. The writer is forced to confront his old self. This constant shift from the past to the present and vice versa, and understanding the formation of one’s own life-patterns helps the writer to define himself. The life of Graham Greene is a case in point. A psychiatrist advised him to write his memoirs in order to get rid of the depression he was afflicted with. While writing ‘A sort of life’ he forgot his depression for which he was willing to risk even an electric shock. (4) For Dom Moreas, writing his autobiography was an experience of ‘catharsis’. (3) He was able to write off an unpleasant childhood haunted by a mad mother and painful adolescence. He was able to begin life anew. Modern life has rendered us without any moorings. These two examples emphasise the role of autobiography in helping a writer to gather the various incidents of his life which have gone astray and regain his identity.

The essay is confined to writers’ autobiographies in English. Hence it ignores the brilliant diaries of the French writers, the memoirs from Russia and India (not in English). The classic memoirs of Simone Beauvoir and the accounts of various painters are not included here.

Another additional benefit of autobiographical writing is that it leads to a great appreciation of the works of the author. For instance in Graham Green’s first two volumes of

autobiography, the reader is shown how each work is influenced by the writer's state of mind at that particular time. In an autobiography a writer is fully revealed, in a novel he is hidden. C.P. Snow's contention that professional writers should not write autobiographies does not hold water these days. Snow himself praised the autobiography of H.G. Wells for its candidness. We are sure to have a greater understanding of the works of Shakespeare and Milton if they had produced autobiographies. The sonnets do not reveal much, and the little revealed is subject to dispute. The nineteenth century novelists like Dickens and Balzac wrote novels which have a strong autobiographical content. It is a matter of regret that Sir Walter Scott did not leave any account of his life. The twentieth century alone can be termed the golden age of autobiography. It has now become fashionable to publish one's memoirs after establishing a certain degree of reputation as a writer.

Dostoyevsky's remark – in *Notes from Underground* – that in remembrances a writer may state things that he is afraid to reveal even to himself requires a closer study. (42) In our subconscious mind may float several thoughts and opinions that may find expression in memoirs. These opinions may shock even the writer. In his collection of autobiographical stories *Old Songs in a New Cafe*, Robert James Waller observes:

I am discovering as I write, what I really think,
what I really believe. Your deepest feelings can
cause you to shudder a bit because you didn't know
they were there and writing has uncovered them. (1)

Bill Silag says in his introduction to the book that – 'For him the creative process is a personal exercise in self-discovery'. (2)

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Art Buchwald has written one of the most moving volumes of memoirs that have come in recent years. For a man who made an enviable reputation as humourist, it is a poignant memoir of a mad mother, disorganised childhood, and work in the army, depressions and his Paris years. Told with humility and frankness, his sexual adventures form a significant part of the book. Bertrand Russell's autobiography – published at the autumn of his life – is an effort to make the reader understand how the forces of love, knowledge and pity for suffering have dominated his life. It is the picture of a warm human being that emerges in the autobiography of a man who is out and out an intellectual. Beginning with a frank portrayal of his early years, the narrative continues in the form of letters and the penportraits of distinguished men of letters like White Head and Joseph Conrad. It is a life rich in experience. Russell draws deeply from an inexhaustible mine of recollections. The style is pithy and on the whole it is a good endeavour to understand his life in terms of the ideals he set for himself.

The recently published book *Unsent Letters* by Malcolm Bradbury illustrates how the autobiographical form can be used in a marvellously funny manner. The life of this famous novelist and critic has been narrated in a humorous manner. It contains valuable information about writing: Bradbury's British Museum days, America, his struggle as a writer, his wife, conferences, campus novels and television script writing.

C.P. Snow's praise for the autobiography of H.G. Wells speaks volumes on its merits. *Experiment in Autobiography*, published in 1934, was probably one of the first autobiographies which dwelt on the sexual life of the author. The two volumes of memoirs belong to the classics of modern literature. Of special interest is the author's account of his cousin. The quality most

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noticeable in the book is the total frankness of the author about sex at a time when the British Public had not recovered from its Victorian prudishness.

It is when we come to the autobiographies of poets like Coleridge and Yeats that we come in contact with the inner man. Edwin Muir's autobiography also shares some of this. In the portrayal of their dreams, moments of vision, inspiration and experiences the reader sees the growth of the artist. The letters of Coleridge throw a flood of light on his personality. In his letters, Macaulay emerges as a man of integrity, ever conscious of his scholarly calling, and they bear ample testimony of his stature as a Victorian man of letters. There are plenty of autobiographical accounts of the writer at work. Three examples which can be cited are Somerset Maugham's *The Summing Up*, V. S. Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* and Hemingway's *Paris – A Moveable Feast*. Maugham's work (though in the beginning he says, 'this is not an autobiography nor is a book of recollections') is far more self-revealing than most other memoirs. His statement 'I must write as though I was a person of importance, and indeed, I am – to myself. To myself I am the most important person in the world', is the reason for the writing of most autobiographies. This book, along with 'A Writer's Note book', is a key to the understanding of this author of prodigious talent. In this is given his intellectual apprenticeship, his emotional limitations ('... never felt some of the fundamental emotions of normal men, 'The hysteria of the world repels me'), his physical limitations, which are central to the study of his novels. The author comes out bare with that

'unhappy honesty' Graham Greene wrote about. V.S. Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* (Prologue to an autobiography) tries to admit the reader to the process of writing. In the recently published, *A Way in the world*, Naipaul has continued the story of his life.

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Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* is a delightful account of the writer's life in Paris in the twenties.

Graham Greene's *A Sort of life* is the account of according to 'The Times', the most influential writer of the century. The writer is not ashamed of the crime and follies of his early years. Memory for him 'is like a long broken night. As I write, it is as though I am waking from sleep continually to grasp at an image which I hope may drag in its wake a whole intact dream, but the fragments remain fragments, the complete story always escapes.'(321) His turbulent adolescence – Russian Roulette and several suicide attempts – is an unforgettable part of the book. The second volume *Ways of Escape* fails in comparison with the earlier volume. Though it contains valuable information on his novels, it is more a writer's account of his works than an auto biographer looking at the various aspects of his personality – a quality in which the first volume succeeds.

Autobiographies are essentially quests for one's identity. It is a form for writers to indulge in self-introspection. In our times, this art form has prospered and has a splendid destiny ahead.

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